



Research article

Exploring alternate specifications to explain agency-level effects in placement decisions regarding Aboriginal children: Further analysis of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect Part C



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ABSTRACT

A series of papers using data from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) explored the influence of clinical and organizational characteristics on the decision to place Aboriginal children in out-of-home placements at the conclusion of child maltreatment investigations. The purpose of this paper is to further explore a consistent finding of the previous analyses: the proportion of investigations involving Aboriginal children at a child welfare agency is associated with placement for all children in that agency. CIS-2008 data were used in the analysis, which allowed for inclusion of previously unavailable organizational and contextual variables. Multi-level statistical models were developed to analyze the influence of clinical and organizational variables on the placement decision. Final models revealed that the proportion of investigations conducted by the child welfare agency involving Aboriginal children was again a key agency-level predictor of the placement decision for any child served by the agency. Specifically, the higher the proportion of investigations of Aboriginal children, the more likely placement was to occur for any child. Further, this analysis demonstrated that structure of governance, an organizational-level variable not available in previous cycles of the CIS, is an important agency-level predictor of out-of-home placement. Further analysis is needed to fully understand individual and organizational level variables that may influence decisions regarding placement of Aboriginal children.

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Introduction

A series of papers using data from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) (Chabot et al., 2013; Fallon et al., 2013; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010) have explored the influence of clinical and organizational characteristics on the decision to place Aboriginal children in out-of-home placements at the conclusion of child maltreatment investigations. These prior multi-level analyses, based on data collected in the 2003 cycle of the Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS), found that children were at increased likelihood of being placed in out-of-home care if served by a child welfare agency with a high proportion of investigations involving Aboriginal children. The 2008 cycle of the CIS included a broader range of contextual factors such as the array of services agencies provided, the use of differential response or alternative dispute resolution models, agency structure of governance, on and off reserve service provision and community remoteness.

The principal goals of this paper are to assess the robustness of findings from prior studies and determine whether the proportion of investigations involving Aboriginal children may have acted as a proxy for organizational and contextual variables included in CIS-2008. Few child welfare studies have systematically collected organizational information and, accordingly, the inclusion of these variables will add to our understanding of the decision-making ecology shaping child-welfare decisions and, more specifically, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Understanding the reasons for the increasing numbers of Aboriginal children in out of home care remains one of the most pressing and important issues for Canadian child welfare systems (Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, 2014).

Literature Review

Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canadian Child Welfare

In Canada, Aboriginal children are overrepresented at all points of child welfare decision-making: investigation, substantiation and placement in out-of-home care (Auditor General of Canada, 2008; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley & Wein, 2005; McKenzie, 1997; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). This overrepresentation likely results from a complex array of factors, including historical and contextual factors, the marginalization of Aboriginal children and families in Canada, and the structure and services provided by child welfare agencies. The most reliable source of data on Aboriginal children in the Canadian child welfare system comes from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; Trocmé et al., 2005, 2001). This cross-sectional study has been conducted in five-year cycles and includes data on initial child protection investigations in Canada, including key service decisions and dispositions (i.e., substantiation, transfer to ongoing services, referrals to internal/external support services, out-of-home placement).

The CIS identifies the Aboriginal cultural group of the child as disaggregated by the three major cultural groups of Aboriginal peoples recognized by the Canadian constitution: Métis, Inuit and First Nations. Given the rich diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations in Canada, the preferred protocol is to situate the research as specifically as possible to affected groups. Thus the term Aboriginal is only used in this paper when describing the collective experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit and more specific descriptors of First Nations, Métis and Inuit are used whenever possible to respect their distinct cultures, histories and contexts.

Analysis from CIS-2008 revealed that First Nations children living in the geographic areas served by sampled agencies were 4.2 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be reported for maltreatment-related concerns (Sinha, Ellenbogen, & Trocmé, 2013). Based on national census data for 2008, Aboriginal children represented 6% of children in Canada and 22% of substantiated reports of child maltreatment in Canada (Trocmé et al., 2010). The significantly higher rate of substantiated investigations involving First Nations children may be explained through a large number of differences at the level of the caregiver (Sinha et al., 2013). Single parenthood and inadequate housing increased the odds of substantiation for investigations involving First Nations children but not for investigations involving non-First Nations children, suggesting associations between specific case factors and substantiation may vary across ethno-racial groups (Sinha et al., 2013). In addition to overrepresentation at the reporting and the substantiation decision stages, Aboriginal children comprise 40% of all children in out-of-home care (Sinha, 2014).

The long history of oppression caused by assimilation policies in Canada has led to an accumulation of disadvantages including high rates of infant mortality and disease, low levels of school performance, high dropout rates, and other health, economic and social disadvantages for First Nations families (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Filbert & Flynn, 2010). Aboriginal families are more likely to live in poverty and have inadequate housing than other Canadians (Auditor General of Canada, 2011; Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009; National Council on Welfare, 2008). Given that Aboriginal peoples continue to be disproportionately affected by structural inequalities relating to housing, poverty and cultural dislocation, it is unsurprising that Aboriginal children are particularly overrepresented in investigations in which neglect, largely fueled by systemic disadvantage, is the sole concern (Carter, 2010). While Aboriginal children comprise a small proportion of the child population in Canada, 26% of neglect investigations involved Aboriginal children (Trocmé et al., 2013).

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